

Dr. David A. deSilva, Hebrews, Session 1A, Introduction to the "Letter to the Hebrews" Part 1

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Welcome to the Deep Dive. Today, we're going to be tackling a book that I think a lot of people find pretty tough. You know, the book of Hebrews.

You actually sent us some excerpts from a lecture series on it and asked for our take. I'm excited. So consider this your crash course in Hebrews for everyone.

Yeah, that's a great way to put it. We're going to try to unlock the mysteries of this often overlooked book. Who wrote it? What makes it unique? And most importantly, why should you care? Yeah, why should we care? So first things first, why does Hebrews have this reputation for being so challenging? What makes it harder to grasp than, say, the Gospel of John or something? It's definitely not beach reading.

It's dense. It's packed with these complex arguments. And it kind of assumes you have this good understanding of the Old Testament, especially all the details about the Levitical priesthood and the temple rituals.

If you're not familiar with those, Hebrews can feel like a foreign language. So you need some background knowledge to really appreciate it? Yeah. But you're telling me it's worth the effort? Oh, absolutely.

What kind of unique insights does Hebrews offer that we wouldn't get from other parts of the New Testament? Well, what's really fascinating about Hebrews is that it gives us these incredible insights into Jesus before his incarnation. It digs into the nature of faith, especially in the face of suffering. And it really emphasizes the importance of community.

Okay, now here's where things get really interesting for me. We don't actually know who wrote Hebrews, right? Right. It's like a biblical mystery novel.

Why is that such a big deal? Well, it's unusual because most of the New Testament books have a clear author attached. For centuries, people thought Hebrews was written by Paul. Oh, really? But now scholars are pretty convinced that that's not the case.

So not Paul. Not Paul. But what clues do we have? About who this mystery author might be? There are some pretty strong hints.

The author was obviously very familiar with Paul's teachings. Maybe someone in his inner circle. Okay.

Plus the writing style is super sophisticated. Yeah. This person was clearly well-educated, a master of Greek, and probably trained in rhetoric.

Oh, wow. You know, the art of persuasion. So picture this.

You're in the first century. Yeah. And you're listening to this incredibly skilled speaker deliver this powerful message.

Yeah. And here's another thing that blew my mind. Hebrews wasn't originally written as a letter, right? Right.

It's more like a beautifully crafted speech. You're picking up on something really important here. Okay.

The way Hebrews is written tells us a lot about how it was intended to be received. It doesn't have the typical letter format. Right.

No greetings, no dear so-and-so. Yeah. It jumps right into this powerful opening statement.

It's more like the beginning of a sermon, right? Exactly. Like, listen up, everyone. I have something important to tell you.

And throughout the text, the author constantly emphasizes the acts of speaking and hearing. Oh, interesting. They use all sorts of rhetorical devices like alliteration and antithesis, which were techniques commonly used in oral delivery.

So they were really trying to drive a point home. This makes you think about the Bible in a whole new way, doesn't it? It totally does. And it makes me wonder about the original audience.

Yeah. What can you tell us about the cultural context the author was writing in? Well, the author was what we call a Hellenistic Jewish Christian. Okay.

That means they were deeply rooted in the Jewish scriptures, but also very much a product of Greco-Roman culture. Wait, unpack that a bit for me. Okay.

Hellenistic Jewish Christian. That's a lot of hyphens. It is a mouthful.

What does it actually mean for how they saw the world? Think of it this way. They lived in this fascinating intersection of cultures. Okay.

On one hand, they had this deep connection to the Jewish scriptures and tradition. Yeah. But they were also living in the Greco-Roman world.

Right. Immersed in its language, philosophy, and way of life. So they were kind of like a bridge between these two worlds.

Yeah. That's really cool. Yeah.

But you mentioned the Jewish scriptures. Right. Wouldn't those have been primarily in Hebrew? Yeah.

How did this author engage with them? That's where it gets even more interesting. The author of Hebrews mainly used the Septuagint. Okay.

Which was a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. Okay. And sometimes that translation had slightly different nuances than the original Hebrew, which the author actually uses to make some pretty powerful theological points.

So the Septuagint, that's the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. Right. So why does that matter? It matters because the author of Hebrews was looking for connections to Jesus in the Old Testament.

Yeah. And sometimes those connections become clearer in the Greek translation. Okay.

The Septuagint opened up new ways of interpreting familiar passages. Gotcha. And seeing how they pointed to Jesus.

Can you give us an example? I'm kind of curious to see how this works in practice. Sure. Let's look at Psalm 8. In Hebrew, it says that humans were made a little lower than the angels.

Okay. But the Greek translation in the Septuagint can mean either lower in rank or lower for a short time. Okay.

I see where you're going with this. Exactly. Yeah.

The author of Hebrews uses this ambiguity in the Greek to connect the verse to Jesus. Yeah. The idea is that for a brief period, Jesus, the Son of God, became human.

Right. Taking on a human form that was lower than the angels during his time on earth. So it's like the author is weaving together these two different threads.

Yeah. Jewish and Greco-Roman to create a tapestry of meaning. Absolutely.

What other examples of that weaving do we see in Hebrews? Oh, there are so many. The author incorporates all sorts of elements from Greco-Roman culture. Like what? For example, they use a lot of pedagogical wisdom.

Okay. The idea that learning comes through experience. Yeah.

And that suffering can lead to greater wisdom. Okay. They also draw on philosophical concepts like the virtue of wisdom, which was a big deal in Greco-Roman thought.

And get this, they even use athletic imagery. Wait, hold on. Athletic imagery.

How does that fit in with a Jewish author writing about Jesus? Remember, they were living in a world where athletic competition was huge. Right. It was a central part of life.

Yeah. So in Hebrews chapter 12, the author compares the Christian life to running a race. Oh, wow.

With a whole crowd of spectators cheering us on. Okay. They also use the imagery of wrestling against sin.

Interesting. It's actually pretty brilliant when you think about it. It's a powerful way to connect with people.

Right. Exactly. Because everyone understands the struggle and the triumph of an athlete.

Exactly. They can relate to that experience. It's another example of how the author bridges these two cultures.

Okay. Taking something familiar from the Greco-Roman world. Right.

And using it to illustrate a deeper spiritual truth. It makes the message so much more vivid and memorable. Yes.

We talked about the Old Testament being important for understanding Hebrews. Right. But how does the author actually use the Old Testament? They're not just quoting verses here and there.

You're right. It's way more sophisticated than that. Okay.

The author has these really interesting interpretive strategies. Okay. They read Old Testament passages as spoken to about or even by the Son.

Okay. Meaning Jesus. It's like they're showing us a hidden dimension of the Old Testament, right? Yeah.

I love that. Can you give us a concrete example of what that looks like? One of the clearest examples is how the author compares Moses to Jesus. Okay.

They see Moses as a type of Jesus. Okay. A prefiguring or a foreshadowing.

Okay. Both are mediators between God and humanity. So they're using what scholars call typological interpretation.

Exactly. Seeing parallels and connections between figures and events in the Old Testament. Yeah.

And the person of Jesus. It's a way of showing how Jesus fulfills the promises and prophecies of the Old Testament. Okay.

It's all connected. It's all connected. Yeah.

It's fascinating how the author weaves these connections together, showing us how Jesus is the culmination of everything that came before him in the Old Testament. And speaking of culmination, one of the things that makes Hebrews stand out is this intense focus on Jesus's priesthood. Oh, yeah.

It's not something you see emphasized as much in other New Testament books, is it? You're absolutely right. Hebrews presents Jesus as our high priest, but not in the traditional Levitical sense. He's a priest of a new order.

Yeah. One that's based on this mysterious figure Melchizedek. Okay.

Now you're going to have to refresh my memory here. Okay. Who was Melchizedek again? Yeah.

My Old Testament knowledge is a little rusty. Melchizedek pops up briefly in the book of Genesis. Right.

He was both a king and a priest. And he blessed Abraham. Right.

Which was a pretty big deal. Okay. Hebrews points to Melchizedek as this foreshadowing of Jesus, who was also both king and priest.

So how is Jesus's priesthood different from the Levitical priesthood that we read about in the Old Testament? The author of Hebrews makes the argument that Jesus's priesthood is superior in a few key ways. Okay. First, it's eternal.

It's not passed down from generation to generation like the Levitical priesthood. Right. And second, his sacrifice is once and for all.

Okay. He doesn't need to offer repeated sacrifices as the Levitical priest did. Okay.

But what does all this mean for us today? Right. Why should we as 21st century Christians care about Jesus being our high priest? That's the million-dollar question, right? Yeah. Here's the thing.

Because Jesus is our high priest, we have this incredible privilege of direct access to God. Okay. We can come boldly before his throne knowing that we'll find mercy and grace when we need it most.

It's like having the ultimate advocate. Absolutely. Someone who not only represents us before God- yes.

But truly understands our struggles because he lived them himself. Exactly. And because Jesus experienced human weakness and suffering- yeah.

He can empathize with our weaknesses in a way that no one else can. Right. It's a powerful picture of compassion.

Now, one theme that keeps popping out throughout Hebrews- yeah. Is this idea of perseverance. Oh, yeah.

Of holding onto our faith even when things get tough. Absolutely. Why do you think that's so central to the author's message? Well, you have to remember the original audience- okay.

The people the author was writing to were facing real persecution and hardship. Right. They were tempted to give up on their faith- oh, well.

To go back to their old way of life. Right. And the author is urging them- yeah.

And us by extension- Right. To stand firm, to not lose sight of the goal. It's like they're saying, hey, I know it's hard- Right.

But don't give up. The reward is worth it. Right.

Yeah. That's a great way to put it. Yeah.

And the author offers these powerful encouragements to help us keep going. Okay. He reminds us that we're surrounded by this great cloud of witnesses- oh, yeah.

All the faithful men and women of the Old Testament who persevered in their faith even when it cost them everything. It's that theme of community again, right? Absolutely. We're not on this journey alone.

We're part of something bigger than ourselves. And that sense of belonging, that support system, is so essential for our spiritual growth. Right.

We need each other to encourage one another- yeah. To lift each other up when we stumble and to remind each other of God's promises. So we've talked about the unique aspects of Hebrews, the focus on Jesus's priesthood, the call to perseverance, this weaving together of Jewish and Greco-Roman ideas.

Yeah. But what's the overarching message? That's a great question. What's the big takeaway the author wants us to grasp? At its core, Hebrews is a call to maturity in our faith.

The author wants us to move beyond the basics- right. To embrace a deeper and more profound understanding of who Jesus is and what he has accomplished for us. It's like graduating from spiritual milk to solid food, right? You got it.

We need to grow up in our faith and become more like Christ. It's about spiritual growth and transformation. So if we had to sum up the message of Hebrews in one sentence, what would it be? Hold fast to Jesus, the ultimate high priest, and persevere in your faith knowing that he is the source of our hope and salvation.

Wow. That's powerful. Now, you mentioned earlier that the author of Hebrews uses a lot of imagery and ideas from the Greco-Roman world.

Yes. One thing that really struck me in the excerpts you sent was this idea of shame. Oh, yeah.

Why is the author talking about shame? Yeah. And what does it mean for us today? That's a really insightful observation. You see, the people the author was writing to were experiencing shame because of their faith in Christ.

They were being ostracized, persecuted, and even disowned by their families and friends. So they were facing real social consequences for their beliefs. Absolutely.

Wow. And the author was concerned that this shame might cause them to abandon their faith. Right.

They were tempted to go back to their old way of life where they wouldn't face such rejection. I mean, that's understandable, right? Of course. It's human nature to want to avoid pain and rejection.

But the author of Hebrews challenges us to think differently about shame. He reminds us that we should be more concerned with God's approval than with what other people think. So it's like he's saying, who are you ultimately trying to please? Yeah.

The crowd or your creator? Exactly. And he points to Jesus as our ultimate example. OK.

Jesus endured shame, rejection, even death on a cross. Right. But he didn't let the fear of shame deter him from his mission.

His focus was on something much bigger. Right. On the eternal reward.

Precisely. And Hebrews encourages us to have that same perspective. OK.

To live for an audience of God, not for the fleeting approval of the world. That's a powerful message for us today. It is.

Especially in our social media-obsessed culture. Yes. We're constantly bombarded with messages about needing to fit in.

Right. To get likes and followers. Yeah.

It's easy to get caught up in that. It's easy to get caught up in seeking the approval of others. Absolutely.

Even if it means compromising our values. You're so right. And Hebrews reminds us that true fulfillment comes from living in alignment with God's will.

Yeah. Not from chasing the fleeting approval of the crowd. It's about finding our identity and security in Christ.

Yes. Not in what other people think of us. Yes.

And that's where true freedom lies. It's about breaking free from the pressure to conform. Right.

And having the courage to stand up for what we believe, even when it's unpopular. It's a challenge, but it's a challenge worth embracing. It is.

And it's a reminder that we're not alone in facing these challenges. Right. We have each other.

Yeah. We have the example of Jesus. Yeah.

And we have the promise of God's unwavering love. That's the beauty of the Christian faith. It's about finding strength and courage in community.

Yeah. And in the knowledge that we are loved unconditionally. So even though Hebrews was written centuries ago.

Yeah. It speaks directly to the struggles and temptations we face today. Absolutely.

The message of perseverance, of holding fast to Jesus, is timeless. It's a message that can give us hope and courage in the face of any challenge. You know, we've covered a lot of ground today.

We have. But there's one more intriguing aspect of Hebrews that I want to explore before we wrap up. Okay.

The author's subtle hints about cosmology. Oh, yeah. It's not something you typically think about when you're talking about a New Testament book.

It's true. Hebrews doesn't offer a systematic cosmology, but there are these little glimpses. These hints about the author's understanding of the universe and our place within it.

What are some of those glimpses? What insights does Hebrews offer about the nature of reality? I'm really curious to hear your take on this. One of the most striking passages is in Hebrews 1. Okay. Where the author describes Jesus as the one through whom God made the ages.

Oh, wow. It suggests this cosmic role for Christ. Okay.

A creative power that extends far beyond our limited human understanding. So it's not just about Jesus's earthly ministry. Right.

He's involved in the very fabric of creation. That's how the author presents it. And it's a pretty mind-blowing concept, isn't it? It is.

It challenges us to expand our vision of who Jesus is. Right. And the scope of his influence.

It really makes you wonder about the vastness of the universe. Yeah. And the mysteries that lie beyond our comprehension.

Exactly. And Hebrews invites us to ponder these mysteries. Yeah.

It encourages us to acknowledge the limits of our understanding. Right. And to stand in awe of God's creation.

It's a reminder that there's always more to learn. Yeah. Always more to explore.

Yes. Always more to discover about God and the universe he created. And that sense of wonder and awe that curiosity is so essential to our faith journey.

Yeah. It keeps us humble. It keeps us asking questions.

And it keeps us open to new possibilities. It really does make you realize that the universe itself is this incredible testament to God's power and glory. You're hitting on something really profound there.

And that brings us to another theme that caught my attention in Hebrews. This idea of the coming world. A reality that goes beyond our everyday experience.

Ah, yes. The coming world. It's a concept that can be a bit mysterious, wouldn't you say? Totally.

The author doesn't lay out a detailed map or anything. Right. But you get the sense that this coming world is something way better than what we experience now.

A realm where everything is perfect and complete. It's like this incredible promise that something even better is in store for us. Something to give us hope.

Yeah. Especially when we're facing difficulties in this life. So would you say it's like heaven? Or is it something different altogether? That's a great question.

And it's one that scholars have debated for centuries. Right. The author of Hebrews doesn't give us a concrete definition.

Right. But they're clearly saying that this coming world is superior to the reality we know now. It's a place of ultimate fulfillment where everything that's broken in this world will be made whole.

It's a total perspective shift, isn't it? To view our lives in light of eternity. Yeah. Knowing that this world isn't all there is.

That's a beautiful way to put it. And that shift in perspective can radically change how we live. How so? It can free us from all those anxieties and attachments that hold us back.

It can give us the courage to face challenges head-on and even make sacrifices. Okay. Knowing that our ultimate reward is found in God's kingdom.

So instead of being consumed by the worries of this life. Yeah. We can live with a sense of purpose and hope.

Right. Knowing that we're citizens of a much greater reality. Precisely.

Hebrews is reminding us that we're pilgrims passing through this world. Yeah. Our journey isn't over yet.

Right. We're headed towards a destination beyond our wildest imaginations. You know, it's funny.

When I first started reading those lecture excerpts you sent. Yeah. I have to admit, I was a little intimidated by Hebrews.

Uh-huh. But after diving deep with you, I'm actually kind of amazed by how relevant it is to our lives today. It's one of those books that keeps unfolding the more you engage with it.

There's always something new to discover. Right. It's packed with wisdom and encouragement that can help us navigate the complexities of life.

We've covered so much ground today. From the mystery of the author. It's true.

To the cultural tapestry of the text. To these profound insights about Jesus' faith and the coming world. Yeah.

A lot to think about. It's given me a whole new appreciation for Hebrews. That's great to hear.

And remember, this is just the starting point. Right. There's so much more to explore.

Yeah. So many layers to unpack in Hebrews. We've just scratched the surface.

That's the beauty of the deep dive, right? We get to explore these fascinating topics. And get a taste of what's out there. Right.

But it's up to you, our listener, to continue the journey. Exactly. We've given you the tools and hopefully sparked your curiosity.

Right. Now it's your turn to dig deeper into Hebrews and see what treasures you uncover. And as you continue exploring, here's something to ponder.

If the author of Hebrews could create such a powerful and timeless message by blending Jewish and Greco-Roman ideas, what does that tell us about how we can bridge cultural divides and communicate more effectively in our own world? That's a great question. Something to think about. Thanks for joining us on this deep dive into the book of Hebrews.